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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 003226

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PHUM SY FR

SUBJECT: MFA OPEN TO FURTHER INTERVENTIONS ON SYRIA HUMAN RIGHTS, WILL CONSULT WITH EMBASSY IN DAMASCUS

REF: STATE 77093

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Poloff discussed reftel points on the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria with MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant affairs Herve Besancenot May 15, urging a more forceful GoF public stance. While agreeing that SARG repression had increased, Besancenot conceded that the French embassy in Damascus had not reported on all the cases noted in our talking points. He pledged to seek further information from the French mission in Damascus, and concluded that the GoF was open to making further public statements on Syria's human rights situation, to follow up on the April 4 MFA statement expressing concern over the sentencing of Abdel Sattar Qattane and Riad Darrar.

2, (C) Besancenot concluded that the increased SARG repression was a likely indicator that the SARG felt less threatened by international pressure and that it could return to "business as usual" in suppressing its population. Poloff countered that it was debatable what motivated the SARG crackdown; what mattered most was that the international community must not remain silent and should not allow the SARG to commit such acts with impunity. A forceful and vocal international response would disabuse the SARG of the notion of subsidizing international pressure, and could make the difference in securing the release of those detained.

¶3. (C) Comment: In the past, Besancenot had suggested to us vague doubts about Kamal Labowani's credibility and character as a civil society activist, as justification for GoF silence on Labowani's arrest. This time, Besancenot raised no such insinuations and sounded more sympathetic, in response to poloff's emphasis on the gravity of Labowani's situation and possible death sentence. We will continue to press the GoF to take a more vocal stance on Syrian human rights and would welcome any additional details we can share with French counterparts. The April 4 MFA spokesman's statement, while a welcome step, was terse and not nearly as forceful, for example, as GoF statements criticizing the human rights situation in Iran, which have been issued at the FM level. Besancenot's lack of familiarity with some of the most egregious recent human rights developments suggests lack of engagement on his part or that of the French embassy in Damascus, which we understand has been essentially cut off by the SARG. End comment.

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Stapleton